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Fearless Foreign Women: Exploring Tamar and Ruth as Characters Within a Post-Exilic Debate
on Intermarriage
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Capstone Essay
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of Genesis 38 on the Book of Ruth. Both texts feature women—Tamar in Genesis 38 and Ruth in the Book of Ruth—whose extraordinary actions result in the preservation of King David’s descendants. While the Book of Ruth draws on many received traditions, its use of Genesis 38 has been underappreciated and not fully understood. To explore this, I identify similarities in the stories, as well as the likely political purpose and historical context of each text. I analyze the ancient practice of retelling biblical stories, and argue that evidence points to the Book of Ruth as a rewritten adaptation of Genesis 38 that advocated for intermarriage in Judean communities. The story was written as part of a larger tradition of post-exilic texts that use Genesis 38 as a basis for the debate on the legitimacy of intermarriage, which erupted under Ezra and Nehemiah during the Persian period.

Keywords: Book of Ruth, Genesis 38, Rewritten Bible, Post-exilic, Intermarriage

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars draw connections between the stories of Tamar and Ruth—two women figures in completely separate areas of the biblical canon. On the surface, the stories are remarkably different. One depicts the harrowing journey of a woman who dresses as a prostitute to sleep with her father-in-law and avoids the grim sentence of being burned to death. The other tells the pleasant tale of a young poor woman who dutifully takes care of her mother-in-law and ultimately enters a happy marriage with a wealthy landowner. If these stories were made into films, the intended audiences would surely be different, with one drawing teenagers desperate to make their way into an R-rated film featuring moderate nudity, and the other appealing to families with young children seeking a happy evening watching Disney. Yet, close-text analysis of these stories reveals that they are more similar than possible filmmakers might think.

This paper explores the possibility that these stories are not only similar, but that the author of the Book of Ruth actually altered Genesis 38. The texts include thematic and narrative similarities, such as women who are not described as Israelite, women who redeem themselves

from low socio-economic status, women who fix an endangered reproductive cycle, and women who deceive men to ultimately preserve the holy line of King David.¹ Yet, Genesis 38 includes storylines focusing on kingship, while the Book of Ruth has themes that center on the righteousness of a foreigner. Notably, these texts were not written in the same period. Genesis 38 was written prior to the exile of the Judeans to Babylonia in 597 B.C.E. The Book of Ruth was written following the return from exile in 538 B.C.E, when Judeans lived under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah who enacted a strict anti-intermarriage campaign to preserve Judean peoplehood. The difference in time period between the texts raises a key question: Why do two non-identical stories from different points in history present such similar storylines? To address this question, I argue in this paper that the Book of Ruth likely developed in the post-exilic era as rewritten adaptation of the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. The authors of Ruth used Tamar's ethnic ambiguity in Genesis 38 as an opportunity to alter Tamar's story—which was written in the pre-exilic era in response to division between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel—in order to oppose the strict condemnation of intermarriage that arose during the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Persian period.

I reference the works of many biblical scholars who focus on close-textual analysis of Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth, and aid my analysis of the ancient pattern of retelling—essentially altering— biblical texts. In my analysis of Genesis 38, I build on the work of Esther Blachman whose book, *The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation*, provides the most comprehensive examination of Tamar in exegesis and biblical

¹ King David was king over the united monarchy of Israel and Judah from 1010-970 B.C.E Many regard him as the greatest king over the Israelites, as well as the ancestor of the Messiah and of Jesus (who is believed to be the Messiah in Christian tradition). King David's reign is described in the books of Samuel and Chronicles, and he is attributed as the author of Psalms.

retellings.² For unpacking the Book of Ruth, I rely on the careful analysis of Andre LaCoque in *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* and *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*.³ LaCoque's analysis of the Book of Ruth is shaped in large part on his expertise on biblical women in their ancient Near Eastern context, and his combination of close-text analysis and historical criticism provides guidance for understanding the Book of Ruth within the historical context in which it was written. My methodology is informed by Julie Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg's *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible*. Both of these scholars delineate the process that undergirds the retelling of biblical stories—a process that is key to understanding my argument.⁴

This paper begins with a summary of both Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth. I then explore the possible non-Israelite background of Tamar and describe key similarities between the stories. This section establishes that Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth as stories that are so uniquely alike that one of the texts could not have been written without the explicit intention of being placed in conversation with the other. The next section of my paper unpacks the post-exilic tradition of retelling Genesis 38 in order to make storylines from the text apply to the post-exilic Judean community. The evidence that I present indicates that many authors retold Genesis 38 in order to comment on the legitimacy of intermarriage, which was a contentious topic beginning in the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah's leadership. Some ancient Judean writers used the

² Esther Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

³ André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); André LaCoque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁴ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation: The New Critical Idiom* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006); Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible* (New York/London: T&T Clark, 2008).

ambiguous description of Tamar's background in Genesis 38 as an opportunity to advocate that her character was certainly Israelite. While the authors of the Book of Ruth also used Genesis 38 as a political tool, they identified Tamar's character as foreign in order to advocate for the benefits of intermarriage. The final section of my paper explores each text's major purpose in order to support my claim that the Book of Ruth rewrote Genesis 38 in order to specifically address the topic of intermarriage. Ultimately, this section argues that Genesis 38 was written in the pre-exilic era in order to bolster Judah's royal legitimacy, while the Book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic era in order to contribute to the debate on intermarriage that erupted under the Judean leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

While many of us recognize that the Bible can be used as a political tool in our own day, we often fail to understand that biblical texts were political even in their ancient contexts of composition and retelling. This paper not only analyzes the alteration of a biblical text for the sake of debate on community legislation, but it also explores how the stories of two biblical women were specifically crafted for purposes of political advocacy in ancient Israelite and Judean societies.

SECTION ONE COMPARING THE TEXTS

Section Overview

In this section, I will briefly provide a summary of both Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth. I identify four key thematic and narrative similarities in Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth: women not described with Israelite identities, women redeeming themselves from low socio-economic status by fulfilling the levirate law, women fixing an endangered reproductive cycle,

and women deceiving men.⁵ The presence of each of these similarities contributes to the preservation of King David's royal Israelite lineage—an outcome crafted by the authors of the texts and enacted by the central characters employed in their stories: Tamar and Ruth. The unique relationship between the texts based on thematic and narrative similarities that lead to this outcome suggests that these stories are intentionally connected; therefore one text must have influenced the other.

Summary of Genesis 38

The story of Genesis 38 opens by explaining that Judah, one of Jacob's thirteen children, leaves his brothers and goes to stay with a man named Hirah of Adullam.⁶ Once in Adullam, Judah marries the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. Together, Judah and his wife have three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er marries a woman named Tamar, but promptly dies because G-D finds him wicked.⁷ Judah then has Onan marry Tamar, explaining to Onan, "be a brother in-law to her [Tamar] in order to raise up the seed for your brother" (Genesis 38:8).⁸ Upset that any children he produced with Tamar would technically belong to his deceased brother, Onan spills his seed rather than inseminating Tamar. On account of this, G-D kills Onan as well.

⁵ Michael Fishbane describes some biblical texts as having a "complex series of thematic and verbal relations" with one another as part of a "dense texture of lexical and paranomastic cross-references" between texts (*Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 316). Throughout my paper, I utilize this understanding that biblical texts contain many intentional thematic and narrative connections with one another in order to create meaning. I will refer to these connections as thematic and/or narrative similarities.

⁶ From the Book of Joshua, we learn that Adullam was a royal Canaanite city (Joshua 12:15, 15:35).

⁷ I write "G-D" throughout my paper instead of a more standard spelling because I adhere to the common Jewish practice of not writing the full name of the Jewish deity. I will later also use YHWH for this purpose as well.

⁸ I use my own translation when quoting Genesis 38 throughout my paper. For other quotes from the Hebrew Bible, I use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

After Onan's death, Judah tells Tamar to live in her father's house until Shelah is old enough to marry her. The text reveals that Judah worried that Shelah would die like his brothers if he married Tamar. Once his wife dies, Judah goes with his friend, Hirah, to Timnah. At this point, Tamar realizes that Shelah is old enough to marry her, but Judah has not given Shelah to her in marriage. She dresses in a veil to disguise herself, and waits for Judah at Enaim, on the path to Timnah. When Judah sees her, he assumes she is a prostitute and demands to sleep with her. He offers to give her a goat as payment, and she asks that Judah give her his seal, cord, and staff as a pledge until he gives her a goat. He agrees, and they sleep together.

When Judah eventually sends Hirah to Enaim to bring the goat as payment, the prostitute that Judah slept with cannot be found. Hirah gives the news to Judah, and Judah advises that they not search for the prostitute "or we will become a laughingstock" (Genesis 38:23). Three months later, Judah is told that Tamar played the prostitute, and is now pregnant. Judah orders that Tamar be burned. When confronted, Tamar sends a message to Judah saying, "To the man whom these [items] belong I am pregnant with a child...this signet, and the cord, and the staff." (Genesis 38:25). Judah recognizes the items as his own and exclaims, "She is more righteous than I, for I wouldn't give her my son, Shelah" (Genesis 38:26). Tamar is not burned, and Tamar and Judah never sleep together again.

Later, Tamar gives birth to twin boys. During the delivery, one of the boys sticks out a hand, and the midwife places a scarlet string on his wrist to symbolize that he is the eldest twin. However, the son brings his hand back inside the womb, and the other brother comes out first. The oldest twin, without the string, is named Perez. The younger twin, the one with the string, is named Zerah.

Summary of the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth begins by recalling that in the time of the judges, a man named Elimelech from Bethlehem in Judah went to Moab with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. Elimelech and the two sons pass away, leaving Naomi and her sons' wives—Orpah and Ruth. Naomi tells her daughters in-law to leave her, and they refuse. Once she says that she cannot provide them with more sons whom they can marry, Orpah leaves. Ruth remains with her mother in-law, explaining, "Your people will be my people and your G-D my G-D" (Ruth 1:16). The two go to Bethlehem together, and Naomi tells the townswomen to call her Mara (meaning bitter) rather than Naomi, because G-D brought misfortune to her.

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem for the barley harvest. Ruth offers to glean leftover grain, and ends up doing so in a field belonging to Naomi's kinsman, Boaz. Boaz takes a liking to Ruth, even once he discovers that she is a Moabite, and extends her special privileges such as drinking water and his warning to men "not to lay a hand on you" (Ruth 2:9). He offers her bread and vinegar and they eat together. When Naomi discovers that Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field, she advises that Ruth continue to glean only in Boaz's field because "in someone else's field you might be harmed" (Ruth 2:21). Later, Naomi tells Ruth that she would like for Ruth to marry Boaz, and commands Ruth to meet Boaz on his threshing floor and lie at his feet once he "has finished eating and drinking" (Ruth 3:3).

In the middle of the night during which Ruth heeds Naomi's command, Boaz praises Ruth for her kindness, and reveals his intentions to marry her. However, another man in Bethlehem is actually more closely related to Naomi, and therefore has more of a right to marry Ruth than Boaz. Boaz gives Ruth six measures of barley, then goes to find this relative. When he mentions that Naomi has returned from Moab a widow, the relative, described as "So-And-So"

in the text, offers to redeem her and buy her estate. Once So-And-So learns that he would actually need to marry Ruth the Moabite, he changes his mind because “I might endanger my own estate” (Ruth 4:6). Boaz proceeds to redeem Naomi’s estate and marries Ruth. He announces his actions to the elders and people of Bethlehem. The elders respond that they hope Ruth will be like Rachel and Leah, that Boaz will be “famous in Bethlehem” (Ruth 4:11), and that through offspring Boaz’s family would be like “Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4:12).

After their marriage, G-D causes Ruth to conceive with Boaz and she gives birth to a son. The women in Bethlehem marvel at Naomi’s fortune, saying that Ruth “is better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). They refer to Ruth’s son as Naomi’s own, and name him Obed. Obed becomes the grandfather to King David, and the story ends by listing the genealogy of King David beginning with Perez.

Major Similarities

Scholars have long noticed similarities between Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth. Esther Blachman lists ten “common features” between the narratives, including widows facing hardship, women conceiving children through the older relatives of their deceased husbands, and women who refuse being sent home to their families.⁹ She describes the Book of Ruth as “one of the earliest commentaries on Tamar,” and notes that the Book of Ruth actually redeems Tamar’s reputation by acknowledging Tamar’s role in the ancestry of Obed (Ruth 4:11-12).¹⁰ Multiple scholars make connections between Tamar, Ruth, and Lot’s daughters in Genesis 19, indicating

⁹ Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 58-59.

¹⁰ Ibid, 60.

that the three follow a similar sexually deceptive type scene.¹¹ André LaCocque highlights the common deceptive nature of Tamar and Ruth's actions, the riskiness of their sexual advances towards Judah and Boaz, and the inclusion of a narrative concerning the levirate law.¹² He explains that the similarities in the stories are intentional, as the author of the Book of Ruth "wanted to bring the story as close as possible to the episode of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38."¹³ In writing the Book of Ruth with this intention, the author ensures that "Tamar the Canaanite becomes Ruth the Moabite" in the story.¹⁴ These scholars—in addition to many others—cite numerous similarities in the characters of Tamar and Ruth as well as themes in the narratives themselves.

My analysis builds on the work of these scholars, demonstrating that the thematic ties between these two stories goes beyond those that Blachman and LaCoque outline. A major thematic similarity between Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth is that neither woman is described as explicitly Israelite. In the case of the Book of Ruth, Ruth is a Moabite. In Genesis 38, Tamar is given no nationality. Many scholars deduce that Tamar is Canaanite due to the fact that Er married Tamar after Judah had moved to a Canaanite city. Esther Blachman identifies Tamar as Canaanite, and Gunther Plaut compares Tamar with Ruth on the basis of their shared foreign identity.¹⁵ Plaut explains, "both accounts together emphasize that King David stemmed from a

¹¹ Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 65-82; Rachel Adelman, "Seduction and Recognition in the Story of Judah and Tamar and the Book of Ruth," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 23 (2012): 88.

¹² LaCoque, *The Feminine*, 101-105.

¹³ Ibid, 93.

¹⁴ Ibid, 95.

¹⁵ Gunther Plaut was a prominent rabbi and Torah scholar, and I use his opinion here to present a respected perspective. In the following paragraph, I also refer to Nahum Sarna to provide a counter-argument from a scholar with similar recognition.

strange and non-indigenous line.”¹⁶ In this case, Tamar and Ruth are both depicted as foreign in order to highlight the non-Israelite ancestry of King David.

Although Blachman and Plaut’s opinions hold weight, other scholars identify Tamar as Israelite rather than Canaanite. Nahum Sarna writes in *The JPS Torah Commentary* that the birth of twins for Judah and Tamar possibly symbolized the replacement of Judah’s first two sons, whom G-D smote while they were married to Tamar.¹⁷ In this scenario, Tamar’s pure Judean sons replaced the mixed-ethnicity sons that Judah fathered with his first wife, a Canaanite. Additionally, I find that foreigners are clearly identified throughout the Hebrew Bible, and Tamar is nowhere explicitly identified as foreign. For instance, Judah’s first wife is identified as “a daughter of a certain Canaanite” (Genesis 38:2). Throughout the book of Ruth, Ruth is called “Ruth the Moabite” (Ruth 1:22, 2:2, 2:21, 4:5, 4:10). When Abraham takes Hagar as his wife, she is referred to as “Hagar the Egyptian” (Genesis 16:1, 16:3, 25:12). Yet, in Genesis 38, Tamar is given no identification, and the text simply states, “Judah took a wife for Er his first son, and her name was Tamar” (Genesis 38:6). Because Tamar is not identified as foreign, she very well may have been an Israelite. With this understanding, the story signals disapproval towards intermarriage with Canaanites, and argues in favor of a purely Israelite Davidic line.

Both arguments for Tamar’s ethnicity are strong, and the ambiguity leaves room for interpretation. The fact that two respected, modern scholars of the Hebrew Bible argue for opposite sides of the argument shows that the silence in the text leaves much room for interpretation and debate. What I find important from the text’s ambiguity is not the chance to prove Tamar’s identity, but the opportunity to see Tamar as a woman who benefited the Israelites

¹⁶ Gunther W. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition* (New York: Union of Hebrew Congregations, 2005), 376.

¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 270.

regardless of her background. Tamar and Ruth both took extraordinary risks to preserve the line of King David, and did not necessarily even have Israelite heritage. Their commitment to strengthening the Israelite nation was not restricted to their ethnicity, and their goal remained the same despite possible differences.

An additional thematic and narrative similarity shared by Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth is that the central women in the story redeem themselves from low socio-economic status by taking risks in order to abide by the levirate law that their male relatives fail to fulfill. Importantly, Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth are the only stories in the Hebrew Bible that include a narrative concerning the levirate law. The levirate law was a practice amongst the ancient Israelites that obligated women to their husband's closest relative in the circumstance of their husband's death.¹⁸ André LaCoque provides insight on the purpose of the levirate law. He notes that the levirate law was written to preserve the Israelites from extinction.¹⁹ After the death of Tamar's first two husbands in Genesis 38, Tamar is left widowed in her father's house without children. The text reveals that Judah does not intend to fulfill the levirate law and give his youngest son, Shelah, to Tamar (Genesis 38:11). Susan Niditch discusses the vulnerability of the childless widow. She notes that in the ancient Near East, women's reputation depended on bearing children.²⁰ Women could either live unmarried and virginal in their father's home or produce children in the home of their husbands.²¹ Like Tamar, Ruth was a childless widow as well, and therefore faced similarly low socio-economic status. In Ruth's story, Naomi informs Ruth that Boaz is Naomi's close relative, and Ruth's husband's close relative as well. While the

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 25:5-10

¹⁹ Lacoque, *The Feminine*, 86.

²⁰ Susan Niditch, "The wronged woman righted: an analysis of Genesis 38," *Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 1 (January-April, 1979): 144-145.

²¹ Ibid.

text does not mention it specifically, Boaz may have known that he was a close relative of Ruth who could have married her to fulfill the levirate law. After Boaz learns that Ruth is Naomi's daughter-in-law, Boaz treats Ruth with more kindness than he treats the other gleaners by inviting her to eat with him, instructing men not to abuse her, and referring to her as "My daughter" (Ruth: 2:8). It is only once Ruth sleeps with Boaz that he fulfills his obligation to her and to Naomi and goes out of his way to marry her. In Genesis 38, it is only after Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, sleeps with Judah, and then appeals to him while being brought out to be burned that Judah acknowledges that she had a right to conceive his family's children. In both of these stories, Tamar and Ruth are obligated to men by the levirate law. The men choose not to fulfill this law, leaving Tamar and Ruth in vulnerable states. It is the women in these stories who take action, redeem themselves from low socio-economic status, and abide by the levirate law. In the end, it is because of Ruth and Tamar that the true spirit of the levirate law is fulfilled, which was to avoid extinction of the Israelites. Importantly, the authors of Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth ensure they both avoid the extinction of a sacred Israelite line—the line of King David.

More importantly than their desire for marriage, both women take enormous risks in order to conceive children, signaling a strong emphasis in their stories on an endangered reproductive cycle with the potential to stunt the lineage that will ultimately produce King David. In Tamar's case, once Judah impregnates her, she no longer attempts to have sex with Judah or Shelah. This signifies that her goal for deceiving Judah and having sex with him was just to conceive. Esther Blachman confirms that Genesis 38 focuses on continuing a genealogy. She points out that words such as "mother," "brother," and "son" are repeated constantly

throughout the text, emphasizing Tamar's mission in continuing the lineage.²² Likewise, Naomi explains in the Book of Ruth that the purpose of obtaining a husband is to conceive. When convincing Ruth and Orpah to leave her at the beginning of the story, she exclaims, "I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up?" (Ruth 1:12-13). Once Ruth and Boaz are married, the text immediately reads, "the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son" (Ruth 5:13). The emphasis on Tamar and Ruth fixing endangered reproductive cycles demonstrates that Tamar and Ruth acted not to benefit themselves, but to preserve an important Israelite line. Regardless of whether or not Tamar and Ruth acted as they did because of divine intervention or because of their own determination to contribute to a larger purpose, they risked everything in order to preserve what becomes the lineage of King David and to benefit the Israelites as a nation.

A final thematic similarity I identify in Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth is that both Tamar and Ruth deceive men, and this action leads to a continued Israelite lineage. In Genesis 38, Tamar deceives Judah by disguising herself as a prostitute and sleeping with Judah. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth sneaks into the threshing floor to lie at Boaz's feet, and likely has sex with Boaz while he is drunk. Both Tamar and Ruth's actions lead to the birth of Israelite children. Women deceiving men for a larger purpose is a common theme throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 27, Rebekah plans for Jacob, her youngest son, to manipulate Esau, her older son, in order to steal the birthright (Genesis 27:23). This results in the Israelites gaining the birthright that is passed down from Abraham and Isaac—the forefathers of the Israelites—rather than the

²² Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 20.

Edomites. In the Book of Joshua, Rahab hides Israelite spies from the Canaanites (Joshua 2:1-7). The Israelites then conquer Jericho and are able to enter the land of Canaan after their exodus from Egypt. In I Samuel 19, Michal helps King David flee from Saul, who aims to kill David (I Samuel 19:11-17). Later, the Philistines kill Saul, and David—still very much alive—is anointed king over the Israelites. Each of these three women's actions affected the Israelites as a nation rather than just individual people. However, only Tamar and Ruth share the thematic similarity of women deceiving men in order to provide a lineage for King David. Although it is not written in Genesis 38, Perez is listed as the ancestor to King David (Ruth 4:18), and Ruth's son is listed as the grandfather to King David (Ruth 4:22). While Michal does save David himself, her story does not include preserving the lineage of King David. Only Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth share the common theme of women deceiving men—a plan crafted by the author of each story so that Tamar and Ruth preserve the descendants of King David, and thus maintain an important Israelite lineage.

Section One Conclusions

Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth contain many thematic and narrative similarities that lead to the preservation of King David's line. Ruth is foreign and Tamar is possibly foreign—thus their actions may not stem from their own personal ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, both women take risks as women of low socio-economic status in order to abide by the levirate law, focus on fixing an endangered reproductive cycle above all other personal benefits they may experience as a result of their actions, and sexually deceive older male relatives. While the women may not consciously have been taking these actions in order to preserve the line of King David, the authors of Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth ensured that their actions led to that

outcome. Indeed, both Tamar and Ruth took action in order to benefit the entire Israelite nation, secure its future, and preserve a vital Israelite line. The culmination of these thematic and narrative similarities with the shared outcome of preserving the line of King David does not appear in any other story in the Hebrew Bible. This demonstrates that Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth share an intentionally crafted relationship.

It is likely that these stories were written in conversation with each other. One story must have been written with the other story in mind in order to replicate these themes. The next section of my paper argues that Genesis 38 was written prior to the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth was influenced by the language and thematic content of Genesis 38 and adapted these themes for a later historical context. Furthermore, the Book of Ruth actually rewrote Genesis 38. The author did so as part of a larger tradition of post-exilic texts that saw Tamar's ambiguous ethnic identity as an opportunity to retell the story and create new meaning.

SECTION TWO: THE BOOK OF RUTH AS A REWRITTEN ADAPTATION OF GENESIS 38

Section Overview

The distinctive thematic and narrative similarities shared exclusively by Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth raise the idea that one text influences the other. I argue that the author of the Book of Ruth applied the ancient practice of retelling biblical stories to his writing and created the Book of Ruth as a rewritten adaptation of Genesis 38. At least three other narratives utilize this methodology to alter Genesis 38: *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees* and *The Testament of Judah*. These texts in addition to the Book of Ruth retell Genesis 38 in order to address the post-exilic discourse on intermarriage, and do so by creating different interpretations of Tamar's

background. Notably, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees* and *The Testament of Judah* depict Tamar as Israelite, while the Book of Ruth interprets the Tamar-turned-Ruth character as foreign. Considering *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees*, and *The Testament of Judah* together with the Book of Ruth shows that the Book of Ruth was part of a larger tradition of stories that applied the ancient practice of retelling Genesis 38. The authors of these texts used what were minor details in Genesis 38—Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite woman and Tamar’s ethnic ambiguity—to contribute an opinion to a debate on intermarriage. Therefore, it is likely that the author of the Book of Ruth was created as a rewritten adaptation of Genesis 38 in order to provide a positive perspective on intermarriage.

Historical Contexts of Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth

Before unpacking the process that the Book of Ruth used to rewrite Genesis 38, it is first important to affirm that Genesis 38 was written prior to the Book of Ruth. Most scholars date Genesis 38 to the pre-exilic era and attribute it to the YHWH-ist writer, who wrote numerous stories promoting the southern kingdom of Judah.²³ J.A. Emerton validates the YHWH-ist writer as the author of Genesis 38.²⁴ Richard Elliot Friedman affirms this belief, and Esther Blachman notes that most scholars agree with this assertion.²⁵ Although Blachman notes in her book that some scholars date Genesis 38 to the post-exilic era, this is not by any means a popular belief

²³ The scholars I rely on here are J.A. Emerton, Richard Elliot Friedman, and Esther Blachman. I refer to J.A. Emerton because his work is constantly cited in scholarly books on Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth. I refer to Richard Elliot Friedman because he is a leading scholar of identifying the writers of biblical stories. I add Esther Blachman to this list of scholars in consensus because her book is the most comprehensive scholarly work solely focusing on Genesis 38.

²⁴ J.A. Emerton, “Judah and Tamar,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 4 (1979): 403.

²⁵ Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 95-96; Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 31-33.

among scholars.²⁶ Indeed, the general consensus is that Genesis 38 is a pre-exilic text, written by an author who consistently promoted the southern kingdom of Judah.

There is a dated argument that the Book of Ruth was written prior to the Babylonian exile.²⁷ Now, there is near unanimity among today's scholars that the Book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic era. Marc Brettler writes that the Book of Ruth is not historical and presents an opposing narrative to the Book of Ezra regarding intermarriage.²⁸ John J. Collins concurs, articulating that the Book of Ruth was "a protest against narrow ethnocentrism."²⁹ So does André LaCocque, who calls the Book of Ruth a "politically subversive pamphlet" from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.³⁰ Ezra and Nehemiah were two leaders over Judeans who had returned from exile during the Persian period, and enacted new laws and norms in order to preserve the Judean community.³¹ One of these new regulations was the condemnation of marriage between a Judean and a non-Judean. The Book of Ezra regards intermarriage as a sin and specifically lists the Moabites as a nation with which Judeans should not intermarry (Ezra 9:1-7). Modern scholarship is unanimous in dating the Book of Ruth to the post-exilic era, and likely to the time of contentious leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

A final layer in unpacking the writing of Ruth is the perspective that Ruth stems from an ancient poem or folklore. George Glanzman and Jack M. Sasson note that the Book of Ruth is

²⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷ See Bava Batra 14a; William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 612.

²⁸ Marc Zvi Brettler, *How To Read The Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 268.

²⁹ John J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. John H. Collins et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 107.

³⁰ LaCocque, *The Feminine*, 100.

³¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 261.

written in a classical prose form. Glanzman writes that Israelites originally passed down parts of the story of Ruth orally in the form of a poem.³² He argues that the Book of Ruth was written in many stages, and though the poem of Ruth may be pre-exilic and not even originally native Israelite, the final writing of Ruth was completed in the post-exilic era. In a similar vein, Sasson notes that Ruth is based on the model of folklore, though is not actually folklore itself.³³ Both of these scholars touch on the idea that the Book of Ruth employs a special model of prose that is difficult to place within a specific time period. I argue that it is likely that the Book of Ruth is based on an ancient poem, giving it the stylistic qualities of folklore. The poem was then reworked in the post-exilic era in order to use a known story to present an opposing narrative to Ezra and Nehemiah's discussion on intermarriage.

Relying on respected scholarship, I deduce that Genesis 38 was written prior to the Book of Ruth. Genesis 38 was written in the pre-exilic era, while the Book of Ruth was finalized in the post-exilic era. Therefore, it is likely that Genesis 38 influenced the Book of Ruth, rather than the other way around.

The Ancient Practice of Retelling Biblical Stories

I now want to explain the common ancient practice that the author of the Book of Ruth likely used to craft a text so deeply influenced by Genesis 38. Many texts in the Hebrew Bible can be viewed through the lens of intertextuality by using similar storylines, character and location names, and even verbatim phrases to create meaning.³⁴ Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg

³² George S. Glanzman, "The Origin and Date of the Book of Ruth," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1959): 202.

³³ Jack M. Sasson, *A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1979), 214f.

³⁴ Intertextuality is a method of reading texts with the understanding that they are in conversation with one another. Thus, meaning that readers discover in the texts can result from connections

explains the concept of “biblical afterlife” in her book *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible* in order to provide context for retellings of biblical stories. Stahlberg describes scholar Yvonne Sherwood’s explanation of retelling biblical stories. Sherwood notes, “biblical texts are literally sustained by interpretation, and the volume, tenacity, and ubiquity of interpretation make it impossible to dream that we can take the text back.”³⁵ According to this understanding of biblical retellings, the essence of retellings is evolving and expanding interpretations to a biblical text. Two major forms of biblical retellings exist: imitating an original text, and rewriting an original text. Imitating a text means to copy the form of the original text, such as copying “the tone, style, and attitude.”³⁶ Appropriation serves as a form of imitation, where the text may not signal a connection to its source text, and the end result is an entirely new piece of work.³⁷ A rewriting of a text, however, simply innovates or supplements it.³⁸ The goal of rewriting a text is to complicate or expand it, rather than transform it altogether.³⁹ Adaptation serves as a form of rewriting, where a text from a specific genre may be rewritten in another genre. Adaptation has the ability to make works more relevant to readers in evolving contexts.⁴⁰ This includes the Masoretic text.⁴¹

between multiple texts, rather than meaning intended only by the original authors of individual works. Intertextuality manifests through literary processes of adaptation and appropriation (see Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation: The New Critical Idiom* [London/New York: Routledge, 2006], 1-3).

³⁵ Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions*, 29.

³⁶ Ibid, 38.

³⁷ Sanders, *Adaptation*, 26-32.

³⁸ Ibid, 12.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 17-25.

⁴¹ The Masoretic Text is the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and it is referred to as “Masoretic” because its present form is based on the scripture tradition of the Masoretes—Jewish scholars from the 5 C.E to 9 C.E (Ernst Würtherwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* [Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995], 12-15).

Read through this lens, the Book of Ruth serves as a rewritten version of Genesis 38. While many of the storylines remain the same, such as the thematic and narrative similarities described in the first section of this paper, larger themes are altered. Changes to the text are made based on making the themes shared between the texts relevant to the discourse on intermarriage in the post-exilic era. Due to this purpose, the Book of Ruth exists as a rewriting of Genesis 38, an adaptation from the original story. The Book of Ruth is a rewriting rather than an imitation because the Book of Ruth does not copy the style or tone of Genesis 38, but rather augments the original story with new characters and plots in order to make the themes relevant in the post-exilic era. Additionally, the Book of Ruth is a rewritten adaptation because the Book of Ruth has many elements of poetry and folklore, and therefore, the themes present in Genesis 38 are placed into a different narrative style.

The Post-exilic Tradition of Rewriting Genesis 38

The author of the Book of Ruth may have rewritten Genesis 38 rather than other biblical texts because he saw it as an optimal text to express a positive opinion on intermarriage. As noted earlier, Tamar's foreign identity is left ambiguous in the Masoretic text. I argue that this sparked later authors to retell Genesis 38 in order to determine her ethnicity and thus state an opinion on intermarriage between foreigners and Judeans. The Book of Ruth identifies Tamar as foreign, and therefore depicts the character representing Tamar in the Book of Ruth as a foreigner. The Book of Ruth shapes a positive outlook on intermarriage; the main character—Ruth—marries into an Israelite family and the town praises the marriage. Most importantly, Ruth is explicitly responsible for the continued lineage of King David, one of the most revered Israelites in history. Without the ambiguity of Tamar's lineage in the Masoretic version of

Genesis 38, the author of the Book of Ruth may not have used Genesis 38 as a basis for taking a stance on intermarriage.

Authors of Targums, *Jubilees*, and *The Testament of Judah* may have retold Genesis 38 in order to state an opinion on intermarriage as well, and saw the ambiguity of Tamar's ethnicity in the Masoretic text as an opportunity to identify Tamar as Israelite.⁴² One Targum in particular that addresses a stance on intermarriage in its translation of Genesis 38 is the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.⁴³ While Targums are difficult to date and scholars theorize that Targums range in date from the Persian period through the rise of Christianity, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is often dated to the time of Ezra in the Persian period.⁴⁴ With this context in mind, I believe that similar to the Book of Ruth, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* retold the story of Genesis 38 in order to participate in the discourse on intermarriage. *Jubilees*, is another text that retells Genesis 38 by condemning intermarriage.⁴⁵ Scholars usually date *Jubilees* to the Hasmonean period, when negative

⁴² I use the following translations for these texts: Michael Maher, ed., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 1992); O. S. Wintermute, trans., "Jubilees" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985); H. C. Kee, trans., "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

⁴³ Targums are rabbinic translations of the Masoretic text from Hebrew to Aramaic, originating at different dates depending on the specific Targum. They are often accompanied by commentary (see Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, vii).

⁴⁴ Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 79.

⁴⁵ *Jubilees* is part of the biblical pseudepigrapha, and is dated to 2nd century C.E (Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Addition, NRSV with the Apocrypha Loose-Leaf Addition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 483). Pseudepigrapha are Biblical books where the author is attributed to a previous famous and respected person, while the actual authorship remains unknown. In the context of books in the Old Testament, pseudepigrapha (which were often written between 7th century B.C.E and 4th century C.E) were not written to replace the Masoretic text, but rather the Old Testament provided inspiration, framework, and foundational stories and background information for the pseudepigrapha. While Christians mostly transmitted these texts, the texts were also written in Jewish communities with the influence of non-Jews. These Jewish communities were often divergent groups within Judaism, such as the Essenes and Pharisees, who wished to heighten the Old Testament and express their devotion to the text. Scholars debate the definition of pseudepigrapha, primarily focusing on the

perceptions of intermarriage prevailed amongst Judean leadership.⁴⁶ *The Testament of Judah* is a text that cites intermarriage as a central evil in Genesis 38 as well. *The Testament of Judah* is also post-exilic and is dated as early as 250 B.C.E and as late as the Maccabean period.⁴⁷ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees* and *The Testament of Judah* are post-exilic texts that each contain retellings of Genesis 38 that existed in opposition to the retelling of Genesis 38 found in the Book of Ruth.

Targum Pseudo Jonathan is an exemplary retelling of Genesis 38 as an anti-intermarriage polemic. References to intermarriage in the Masoretic text are eliminated and sections bolstering Israelite identity are added. In *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Judah's wife's identity as Canaanite is erased. Rather than describing her as "the daughter of a Canaanite" (Genesis 38:2), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* writes that Judah marries "the daughter of a merchant" (TPJ 38:2). The text also clarifies Tamar's heritage, noting that she is "the daughter of Shem the Great" (TPJ 38:8).⁴⁸ Going back to descriptions of Tamar in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, her identity as an Israelite is sharpened even more when she is brought out to be burned later in the story, as she proceeds to cry out to the Israelite G-D. Such an outburst does not happen in the Masoretic text. Additionally, Tamar refers to the pledges Judah gives her as "my three witnesses" (TPJ 38:23). Esther Menn explains that the term "three witnesses" in the Targum referred to Tamar evoking the memory of three saints at Dura who acted as martyrs rather than submit to idol worship.⁴⁹

dating of texts. Regardless of these arguments, the pseudepigrapha provide insight into the values and practices of early Jewish communities and the influence of Jewish scripture on these communities (James. H. Charlesworth *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 1-41).

⁴⁶ Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 117-118.

⁴⁷ Kee, "Testaments," 777-778.

⁴⁸ Shem, one of the sons of Noah, is the eponymous ancestor of the Semites (Genesis 11:10-26).

⁴⁹ Esther Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden Koninklijke Brill NV, 1997), 222.

This reference to witnesses rather than pledges highlights the promotion of monotheistic belief in G-D, and discredits polytheism. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* removes any references to intermarriage with Canaanites, underscores Tamar's Israelite identity, and adds a negative reference to non-Israelite beliefs. Since biblical retellings can occur through translations of biblical texts, these changes indicate that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* retold Genesis 38 in order to use Genesis 38 as the basis for an argument forbidding intermarriage between Judeans and non-Judeans.

The Book of Jubilees is another form of biblical afterlife that rewrites Genesis 38 in order to express condemnation of intermarriage. In Jubilees 41, the text describes Tamar as one of the "daughters of Aram," (Jubilees 41:1), emphasizing her ethnic identity immediately. David K. Zucker and Moshe Reiss note that Aram, also called Paddan Aram (Gen. 25:20), is the birthplace of Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. Therefore, in this version Tamar is explicitly identified as an Israelite rather than as a foreigner.⁵⁰ Additionally, *Jubilees* promotes a view that the entire narrative occurred because Judah married a Canaanite woman. For instance, G-D kills Judah's first son because he "would not lie with her because his mother was from the daughters of Canaan. And he wanted to take a wife from his mother's people, but Judah, his father, did not permit him." (Jubilees 41:2). According to the writers of *Jubilees*, the calamity between Judah and Tamar occurred solely because Judah married a foreigner rather than an Israelite woman. The emphasis on the need for Judah to procreate in order to maintain the line of David in the Masoretic text is replaced in *Jubilees* with Judah's need to procreate with an Israelite in order to preserve Israelite peoplehood. Indeed, Jubilees depicts intermarriage negatively in its rewritten version of Genesis 38, and identifies intermarriage as the source of bad judgment in the story.

⁵⁰ David K. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, "Righting and Rewriting Genesis 38: Tamar and Judah in the Pseudepigrapha," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 4 (Nov. 2015): 197.

Similar to *Jubilees*, *The Testament of Judah* attributes the wrongdoing in Judah and Tamar's story to Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman. Like *Jubilees*, the text describes Tamar as a "daughter of Aram" (TestJud 10:1), marking her Israelite. Er refuses to have intercourse with Tamar "because she was not of the land of Canaan" (TestJud 10:2), and so G-D kills Er. Later, following Onan's death, Judah intends to give Tamar to Shelom, however "his mother [a Canaanite] would not allow it. His mother did this evil thing because Tamar was not the daughter of Canaan as she was" (TestJud 10:6).⁵¹ According to *The Testament of Judah*, the incident between Judah and Tamar would not have occurred had Judah married an Israelite woman rather than a Canaanite woman. In addressing this topic, Judah remarks, "I knew that the race of the Canaanites was evil, but youthful impulses blinded my reason..." (TestJud 11:1). The repeated emphasis in *The Testament of Judah* on Judah's poor judgment for marrying a Canaanite and the descriptions in the text describing Judah's wife and sons as wicked on account of their heritage lead me to conclude that the *Testament of Judah* places ample blame on Judah for his intermarriage. According to *The Testament of Judah*, Canaanites are evil, and therefore intermarriage is evil as well. The key sin in Tamar and Judah's story was Judah's intermarriage with a Canaanite woman.

Due to the fact that all of these biblical retellings of Genesis 38 exist and each addresses the post-exilic debate on intermarriage, what matters is that the Book of Ruth was written as part of a larger tradition of literature that used Genesis 38 as the foundational story for discourse on intermarriage.⁵² Each of these texts created a different interpretation addressing the ambiguity of

⁵¹ Shelom is presumably a translation of Shelah.

⁵² An additional text from the pseudepigrapha that identifies intermarriage as the central evil in Judah and Tamar's story is *Pseudo-Philo*. *Pseudo-Philo* remarks that Tamar felt it was better that she conceive by her father-in-law than by a non-Israelite (Pseudo-Philo 9:5). *Pseudo-Philo* is also a post-exilic text, and is dated to as early as 150 B.C.E but is likely from around the time of

Tamar's lineage in Genesis 38 in order to articulate an opinion about the legitimacy of intermarriage following Judean exile to Babylonia.⁵³ Retelling Genesis 38 in order to address the intermarriage debate is not unique to the Book of Ruth, even if it is the most dramatically altered retelling. It is simply a rewritten adaptation of Genesis 38, using a common practice of biblical retelling to express positive sentiment towards intermarriage within the Judean community.

Section Two Conclusions

The process of retelling a biblical story is not only legitimate, but scholars even observe a pattern where authors of ancient texts alter biblical stories when creating new literature.

Evidence shows that the Book of Ruth was not only influenced by Genesis 38, but likely retold the story in Genesis 38 as a form of rewritten adaptation. By changing some themes of the text and using elements of an ancient folktale, the Book of Ruth makes the basis of Genesis 38 relevant to a historical time period later than its intended audience. The Book of Ruth was not the only post-exilic text to retell Genesis 38; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees*, and *The Testament of Judah* retell Genesis 38 as well in order to apply the story to post-exilic Judean communities. Each text provides its own interpretation of Tamar's background in order to contribute to an ongoing debate on intermarriage that began under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees*, and *The Testament of Judah* interpret Tamar as Israelite, and use this

Jesus. Because its recap of Genesis 38 is fairly brief, I have not included an entire paragraph examining *Pseudo-Philo* in my paper (D. J. Harrington, trans. "Pseudo-Philo" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2*, ed. James H. Charlesworth [New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985]).

⁵³ Though not a form of biblical retelling, the Book of Malachi—which is often dated to the Persian period—describes Judah negatively for marrying a foreign woman (Malachi 2:10-12). Because Malachi simply comments on Genesis 38 rather than retelling the story, I have not included a paragraph on Malachi in my paper. However, it is notable that the author of Malachi also took an opportunity to address the ambiguity of Tamar's identity—should the text be referring to Tamar rather than Judah's Canaanite wife.

interpretation to shed a negative perspective on intermarriage. The Book of Ruth, on the other hand, works with the assumption that Tamar is foreign when recasting Tamar as Ruth in the rewritten version of Genesis 39. Therefore, the author depicts a foreign female character that goes to great lengths to strengthen the Israelites. In sum, the Book of Ruth uses the method of rewritten adaptation to argue that intermarriage in Judean communities should be permitted.

SECTION THREE: THE TRANSITION OF A PRE-EXILIC TEXT PROMOTING ROYAL LEGITIMACY TO A POST-EXILIC STORY ADVOCATING FOR INTERMARRIAGE

Section Overview

This section uses close-textual analysis to reveal the significant shift in the purpose of Tamar's story from Genesis 38 to its rewritten form as the Book of Ruth. First, Genesis 38 includes three motifs that promote Judah's royal legitimacy. These motifs suggest that Genesis 38 was written to legitimize the southern kingdom of Judah. The Book of Ruth, on the other hand, includes three key themes related to the righteousness and acceptance of foreigners. On account of these themes, it is likely that the Book of Ruth was written to promote intermarriage in the post-exilic Judean community. Indeed, the Book of Ruth replaced themes in Genesis 38 emphasizing royal legitimacy with motifs that promote intermarriage.

Identifying the Purpose of Genesis 38

There are three key motifs present throughout Genesis 38: the repetition of key words relating to kingship, a younger son gaining power over the older, and allusions between Judah and the Joseph novella. All three of these motifs relate to legitimizing power and kingship, and ultimately illuminate Genesis 38 as a story written in order to legitimize the southern kingdom of

Judah. Judah existed in a power struggle next to the northern kingdom of Israel from approximately 930 B.C.E to the Assyrian destruction of Israel in 722/721 B.C.E. While intermarriage is present in Genesis 38, it cannot be seen as a primary focus in the text.

The first motif in Genesis 38 is the repetition of keywords related to kingship, which enhances the story's direct connection with King David. Esther Blachman notes that the pledge items that Judah gives Tamar—his staff, seal, and cord—were signs not only of status and identity, but of kingship as well.⁵⁴ Nahum Sarna adds that the Hebrew word *mateh*, meaning “staff” in this story, can also mean “scepter.” The use of *mateh* to represent power and leadership is evident in multiple instances in the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah 14:15 and Ezekiel 19:11-14. It also represents loyalty in Psalms 110:2.⁵⁵ With this understanding, the use of the word “staff” in Genesis 38 is far from arbitrary; rather, the author specifically chose to describe an item of kingly importance. I maintain therefore, that a central goal of the author in writing Genesis 38 was to foreshadow Judah's connection to kingship. A second motif is the younger son gaining power over the older—which happens with Perez and Zerah. Judah Goldin explains that younger sons gaining power is a symbol that occurs more often in the Hebrew Bible than in any other text.⁵⁶ This occurs many times throughout the forefathers' narratives.⁵⁷ Additionally, this theme occurs in the stories of multiple leaders over the Israelites such as Gideon, Moses, and even King David. Therefore, Tamar and Judah's younger son, Perez, is directly connected with King David not only through lineage, but also through the trope of the youngest son's gaining power. Finally, Genesis 38 includes themes that allude directly to the Joseph story, which is commonly referred

⁵⁴ Blachman, *The Transformation of Tamar*, 39.

⁵⁵ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 268.

⁵⁶ Judah Goldin, “The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no. 1 (March 1977): 32-34.

⁵⁷ Genesis 4; Genesis 21; Genesis 27; Genesis 48.

to as the “Joseph novella.” The most significant allusion is that Genesis 38 is placed in the middle of the Joseph narrative. Donald B. Redford explains that this interruption is part of what he calls the “Judah-expansion.” Redford sees two versions of the Joseph narrative: one promoting the northern kingdom of Israel, and the other promoting the southern kingdom of Judah. The author who added the “Judah-expansion” redacted stories that promoted the northern kingdom, and even added stories to promote Judah.⁵⁸ This “Judah-expansion” author wrote episodes in the Joseph novella where Judah is heroic rather than Reuben, an ancestor to the northern kingdom. The author also wrote Genesis 38, which identifies Judah as the ancestor to King David.⁵⁹ In sum, Genesis 38 exists as a story promoting the kingdom of Judah, and corresponds with other stories that depict Judah as powerful. These three motifs present in Genesis 38 demonstrate that the text was written to bolster the southern kingdom of Judah’s claim to kingship and perception of superiority over the northern kingdom of Israel.

While Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite woman is noted in the text, intermarriage as an issue for debate is not present. Intermarriage exists in the text as a buried detail that ultimately speaks to issues of a later community. I will next analyze the purpose of the Book of Ruth—which looks remarkably different from the purpose of Genesis 38.

Identifying the Purpose of the Book of Ruth

The story of Ruth emphasizes three major themes: the Israelite community’s acceptance of a foreigner, the promotion of *chesed* (kindness), and redemption. These themes bolster the story’s depiction of Ruth as an admirable character and display Ruth as a model for readers to

⁵⁸ Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph: (Genesis 37-50)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 179.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

follow. By focusing on these specific motifs, the story purposely promotes a positive spin on Ruth's character. An untraditional model, Ruth proves that a foreigner has the potential to benefit the people of Israel.

Ruth's identity as a foreigner accepted into the Israelite community is not only a central plot of the story, but is highlighted at every opportunity in the text. Throughout the Book of Ruth, Ruth is called "Ruth the Moabite" (Ruth 1:22, 2:2, 2:21, 4:5, 4:10). Her identity is repeated towards the beginning and ending sections of the story as though reminding readers not to forget her alien identity. Additionally, her identity as specifically Moabite is significant, as the Moabites were one of the Israelites' most detested enemy nations. Genesis 19 provides an entire gruesome birth story for the creation of Moab, explaining that the nation of Moab was born from incest when Lot's daughters initiate sex with their drunken father (Genesis 19:30-37). Throughout the Bible, Moab is described as an enemy nation.⁶⁰ By identifying Ruth as a Moabite, the authors purposely emphasize Ruth's foreignness; she is not just foreign, she is as much of an "other" to the Israelites as possible. André LaCocque adds that the Israelite characters in Ruth's story act abnormally, and thus are outsiders, too. Like Ruth, they go against the grain.⁶¹ Naomi takes Ruth under her wing despite Ruth's foreign identity. Boaz takes a liking to Ruth immediately out of all the gleaners in his field, does not mind her foreign identity, and is happy that Ruth lies at his feet on his threshing floor when he is drunk.⁶² Even the people of Bethlehem react positively to Ruth, and compare her to biblical matriarchs. In this manner, everyone in the Book of Ruth acts oddly and outside normative expectations of characters within biblical literature. Their actions, it seems, are foreign to normative Israelite standards. Ruth's

⁶⁰ 2 Kings 3; 2 Kings 13:20; Psalms 60:8; Isaiah 16:6; Jeremiah 48; Amos 2:1-3.

⁶¹ LaCocque, *Ruth*, 151.

⁶² As I mentioned in the summary of the Book of Ruth, the imagery of lying at another person's feet is a biblical euphemism for sex.

identity as a foreign Moabite sits at the centerpiece at every place in the story, and the concept of difference and outsider activity is highlighted in order to emphasize that theme.

Ruth's tendency to act with *chesed*, meaning kindness, is central to the story as well, and her acts of kindness set her apart from every other character. First, the word *chesed* only occurs three times in this story—twice to describe G-D (Ruth 1:8, 2:20) and once to describe Ruth (3:10). In this manner, not only is Ruth described similarly to G-D, but she even appears to rise to a holy level. André LaCocque notes that the book of Ruth emphasizes that *chesed* has the ability to trump law itself, topping law with kindness, love, and loyalty.⁶³ In this manner, *chesed* actually redeems Ruth's Moabite identity. When Boaz describes Ruth with the word *chesed* in Ruth 3:10, he then continues to reveal that he will ensure that either So-And-So or himself will marry Ruth, and assures her that "all the people in my town know that you are a woman of noble character" (Ruth 3:11). It is *chesed* that leads to Ruth's marriage, Naomi's redemption, and Naomi's role in the Davidic line. The Rabbis affirm that *chesed* is a major focus in the story, explaining that the Book of Ruth was written, "to teach us how great the reward is for those who do deeds of kindness" (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).⁶⁴ The Book of Ruth displays *chesed* as a model for readers' actions, and therefore emphasizes *chesed* as a major motif.

Finally, the Book of Ruth includes the recurring theme of redemption. The plot itself revolves around Ruth seeking to fulfill the levirate law for Naomi by marrying Naomi's close kinsman. In this manner, Ruth is looking to redeem Naomi, and Boaz and So-And-So function as possible redeemers. When Ruth fulfills this task and marries Boaz, the women of Bethlehem declare that Ruth is "better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). The number seven in the Bible

⁶³LaCocque, *Ruth*, 27.

⁶⁴ This translation is taken from L. Rabinowitz, trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* (London/New York: Soncino, 1983).

is a symbol for fullness, as seen in Pharaoh's dreams interpreted by Joseph (Genesis 41), and the number of sons Job has prior to his devastation (Job 1). Furthermore, once Ruth births a son, Naomi cares for him as her own and the women of Bethlehem declare, "Naomi has a son!" (Ruth 4:16). The story indicates here that Ruth has redeemed Naomi by continuing her lineage. Not only that, but Ruth's son, Obed, becomes the grandfather to King David, meaning that she has restored lineage to an important and holy Israelite line. Redemption in the Book of Ruth is abundant, and the story ties Ruth's role as a trickster for the greater good with her role as redeeming an important Israelite House.

These three themes all indicate how hard the author of Ruth works to portray the foreign Moabite Ruth as positive in specifically Israelite ways. Ruth is a foreign woman who acts with the trait of *chesed* associated with the Israelite G-D, and redeems an Israelite house making possible the continuation of an essential royal house in Israelite history. Bestowed with holiness by G-D and thus an inclination to participate in a divine plan, her actions reflect devotion to the Israelite G-D and the Israelite people. Therefore, the authors specifically wrote the Book of Ruth to highlight the benefits of including foreigners into the Israelite community.

Because scholarship dates the Book of Ruth to the post-exilic area at the end of the Persian period, it is imperative to understand its purpose situated in the debate on intermarriage during the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is likely that the author of Ruth utilized these themes in order to promote the possibility of intermarriage within the Judean community in exile in Babylonia. Many authors from the Persian period used writing as a political tool to advocate for or against intermarriage, which was a contentious issue at the time. The Book of Ruth parallels a similar theme in other stories dating from the Persian period. The Book of Jonah, for instance, depicts Jonah going to the Ninevites, and the story reveals that the Ninevites are

actually more righteous than he, an Israelite.⁶⁵ In the Book of Esther, the entire story is set in Persia, and a number of the Persians are depicted as righteous.⁶⁶ In seeing the Book of Ruth as oppositional to the narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah, these scholars who promote post-exilic dating indicate that the Book of Ruth was written for the purpose of advocating that intermarriage was not sinful. To exemplify this belief, the authors of the Book of Ruth connect Ruth with the Israelite G-D and the Davidic monarchy. Therefore, Ruth the Moabite is described favorably—encompassing *chesed*, redeeming Naomi, and serving as an ancestor to the man revered as the greatest king over the Israelites.

Section Three Conclusions

Genesis 38 was a pre-exilic text written by the YHWH-ist writer in order to legitimize the kingship of the southern kingdom. The Book of Ruth, on the other hand, was a post-exilic text written by an author wishing to provide an opposing perspective on the condemnation of intermarriage spread by Ezra and Nehemiah in the Persian period. The texts were written in completely different stages of Israelite and Judean history, and were therefore written in order to participate in very different political debates regarding the future of the Israelite/Judean people. Indeed, the Book of Ruth rewrote Genesis 38 specifically to address the topic of intermarriage, and participate in a debate utilized by authors of numerous stories in the biblical canon as well as the multiple retellings of Genesis 38.

⁶⁵ LaCoque, *Ruth*, 27.

⁶⁶ LaCoque, *The Feminine*, 92.

CONCLUSION

The evidence that I have organized in this paper leads me to conclude that the Book of Ruth was likely created as a rewritten adaptation of Genesis 38. The Book of Ruth combines elements of an ancient folktale story with key themes from Genesis 38, a pre-exilic text. The story's emphasis on uplifting foreign identity indicates a pro-intermarriage mentality. In using Genesis 38 to shape the Book of Ruth, the author reads Tamar's ambiguous identity as foreign, and therefore uses Genesis 38 as a political tool for promoting intermarriage within the Judean community. Yet, altering storylines in Genesis 38 as a basis for making a statement on intermarriage was not unique to the Book of Ruth. This paper explores the ancient practice of retelling Genesis 38 for this purpose and identifies multiple retellings of Genesis 38 that stake a position in the intermarriage debate. While there may be numerous interpretations and purposes for the Book of Ruth, surely one of the story's main intentions was to contribute to this tradition of using Genesis 38 to promote an opinion on intermarriage.

These findings have the potential to challenge conceptions of biblical women as passive or secondary characters, as well as present issues when viewing women as figures of empowerment. While my findings on Tamar and Ruth reveal that these women are depicted as going to great lengths to preserve the Israelite/Judean people, their actions support patriarchal dominance in the ancient world. As referenced in section one of this paper, Esther Fuchs identifies Tamar and Ruth as biblical mothers who are part of a temptation type-scene present in the Hebrew Bible. Fuchs explains that Tamar and Ruth—as well as Lot's daughters—take action to preserve the Israelite/Judean people while the men in their stories do not. The women are deemed righteous for their trickery in order to birth a male heir. However, it is the men, not the

women, who are celebrated as powerful figures.⁶⁷ For instance, it is Boaz, not Ruth, who is listed in the genealogy of King David—despite Boaz’s limited efforts to redeem Naomi’s House.⁶⁸ To Fuchs, “the mother is a means to an end...her validation functions ultimately as the validation of patriarchal hierarchy.”⁶⁹ I believe that my discovery of the tradition of using Genesis 38 in the debate on intermarriage challenges Fuchs’ statement. Although Tamar and Ruth are both used by male writers in order to promote a political opinion, the nature of the political opinion determines whether it reaffirms or challenges the practice of using biblical women to advance patriarchal status quo. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Jubilees* and *The Testament of Judah* use Genesis 38 to promote upholding relatively new status quo within Judean society, and thus use Tamar to uphold laws set by patriarchal leaders. The Book of Ruth, however, uses its central woman figure, Ruth, to challenge these rules and resist the action of putting borders between Judean society and its neighbors. It is in the Book of Ruth alone that Tamar-turned-Ruth is written to dismantle a type of hierarchy being built within Judean communities.

The Tamar-turned-Ruth character in the Book of Ruth should be read as a figure of empowerment and resistance and not simply someone who uplifts powerful men. Yes, Ruth’s actions ultimately lead to the preservation of the House of David, and her contribution to this preservation is replaced with Boaz’s name in recordings of lineage. However, the authors’ depiction of the Tamar-turned-Ruth character as foreign in order to promote intermarriage at a time when intermarriage was condemned by Judean leadership is an empowering form of resistance in the ancient world. In the Book of Ruth, Tamar and Ruth are more than simply chess

⁶⁷ Fuchs, *Sexual Politics* 69-82.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 82.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 90.

pieces in a man's game of power; they are the fearless foreign women who challenge the status quo.

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